

The Shortest Route to Nibbāna



by
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© Latest Edition September 2024
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The Shortest Route to Nibbāna

I suppose that most who wish to attain the end of suffering would like to do so as quickly and easily as possible. To that end I will relate the story of Bāhiya Dārucīriya, who was extolled by the Buddha as the one pre-eminent in the speed of attainment (*khippābhiññānaṃ*).

The Story of Bāhiya Dārucīriya

In a previous existence, during the dispensation of Buddha Kassapa, he was a bhikkhu. The Buddha Kassapa had passed away, and at that time his dispensation was already in a state of decline. As is the case nowadays, most monks did not practise meditation diligently to attain nibbāna. They were lax in their practice of the monastic discipline, content to live a comfortable life on the gifts of others, while merely performing rituals. Disgusted with this state of affairs, seven monks climbed to a mountain refuge with the aid of a ladder, and threw it away so that none could retreat. They vowed to attain the goal of the holy life, or to die in the attempt.

The first of the seven soon gain Arahantship together with the mystic powers, and went to collect almsfood by flying through the sky. However, the remaining six refused to eat whatever he brought back to share with them. The second of the seven gained the stage of Non-returning with the mystic powers, and brought almsfood to share, but the remaining five refused to eat it. None of the five gained any stage of the path, and died of starvation at the end of seven days, while still striving with the utmost effort.

They all fared according to their kamma, the Non-returner was reborn as a Brahmā in the Suddhāvāsa Brahmā realm, and the remaining five wandered in the round of rebirth until the time of Buddha Gotama when all five were reborn in India (Jambudīpa).

Bāhiya was reborn as a ship's captain who traded goods by sailing the oceans from the port of Suppāraka, near Bombay in the south of India. One day, his ship was wrecked, and all of the crew perished, except for Bāhiya, who managed to swim ashore due to his exceptional courage and determination. Having lost all of his clothes in his struggle to survive, he found some bark to wear. He found a discarded

pot, and went for alms in a nearby village, clad only in his roughly made bark garment, and thus became known as Bāhiya Dārucīriya (Bāhiya, the bark-clothed). The local people were impressed by his deportment and lack of possessions, showed him great respect, and referred to him as an Arahant, or one who has cut off all defilements. Bāhiya was content to live like this for some time, and gradually came to believe that perhaps he was free from defilements, as he was content to remain without possessions and to live on alms.

At that time, the Non-returner Brahmā god in Suddhāvāsa knew the wrong view that had arisen in Bāhiya's mind, and so felt compelled to visit his former companion, out of compassion, to dispel this wrong view that would only send him to hell. The Brahmā god approached Bāhiya in his solitary retreat, and admonished him, "Bāhiya, you are no Arahant who has dispelled all defilements. There is a true Arahant, the recluse Gotama, who is currently dwelling in Sāvattī. Go to see him, and ask him about the path to Arahantship."

Realising the truth of the words spoken by the deity, Bāhiya set off for Sāvattī that very night, determined to meet Gotama. With the help of the Brahmā god, Bāhiya was able to travel right across India during the night, arriving at Sāvattī shortly after dawn.

On asking to see the recluse Gotama, he was told, "Please wait here for him to return. He has gone into Sāvattī for alms." However, Bāhiya was extremely anxious to meet the Buddha, as he was well aware that a human being could die at any moment. He might die without even meeting him. So Bāhiya set off at once for Sāvattī in pursuit of the Buddha. When he caught up with him, Bāhiya bowed at his feet and begged him to teach the Dhamma that would lead to the end of suffering. The Buddha used his psychic powers to consider Bāhiya's potential to realise the truth, and discerning that he was not yet ready to gain Enlightenment, he asked him to wait: "Bāhiya, it is not the time for me to teach the Dhamma. I am on my almsround. Please wait." However, Bāhiya was so earnest that he could not wait, so he asked the Buddha again to teach him the Dhamma. Again, the Buddha asked him to wait, as it was not the right time. A third time, Bāhiya begged him to teach the Dhamma at once, for life was uncertain, and one born human could die at any moment. The Buddha considered Bāhiya's state of mind again, and perceiving that his spiritual faculties were now mature, he agreed to teach him.

“Tasmātiha te, Bāhiya, evaṃ sikkhitabbaṃ — ‘Diṭṭhe diṭṭhamattaṃ bhavissati, sute sutamattaṃ bhavissati, mute mutamattaṃ bhavissati, viññāte viññātamattaṃ bhavissati’ti. Evañhi te, Bāhiya, sikkhitabbaṃ. Yato kho te, Bāhiya, diṭṭhe diṭṭhamattaṃ bhavissati, sute sutamattaṃ bhavissati, mute mutamattaṃ bhavissati, viññāte viññātamattaṃ bhavissati, tato tvaṃ, Bāhiya, na tena; yato tvaṃ, Bāhiya, na tena tato tvaṃ, Bāhiya, na tattha; yato tvaṃ, Bāhiya, na tattha, tato tvaṃ, Bāhiya, nevidha na hurāṃ na ubhayamantarena. Esevanto dukkhassā”ti.

“Therefore, Bāhiya, you should train yourself thus: as phenomena are seen, heard, thought of, or known, just let them be as they are seen, heard, thought of, or known at that moment. When you see, you just see it; when you hear, you just hear it; when you think, you just think it; and when you know, you just know it. Then, Bāhiya, you will not identify with any of that, nor anything else beyond it. This is the end of suffering.”

On listening to this brief exposition of the Dhamma on mindfulness of phenomena in the present moment, Bāhiya immediately became an Arahant. Then he asked for the going-forth. However, since he had no robes nor an almsbowl the Buddha would not ordain him. He left the Buddha to seek for them, and was gored to death by a certain demoness (*yakkhini*) in the form of a cow.

Exceptional Perfections

On reading the above account of instant Enlightenment, we might think that it should be easy to gain at least Stream-winning, but Bāhiya was an exceptional individual and had an exceptional teacher. During his previous life during the time of the Buddha Kassapa, Bāhiya had been willing to die in his pursuit of the truth. Most of us would find it hard to fast voluntarily for seven days, even if we knew that we could eat afterwards, and we would find it extremely difficult to refuse food during our fast if urged to eat something by a friend.

During the time of the Buddha there were many similar cases of individuals attaining Stream-winning or higher stages of the Path after listening to a brief discourse by the Buddha, such as the acrobat

Uggasena, who became an Arahant after performing stunts on the top of a bamboo pole, when the Buddha taught him the Dhamma. However, even during the Buddha's time, such cases were exceptional. Others had to listen to a long discourse, or they had to practise meditation for years before attaining the Path. Some individuals met the Buddha, listened to the teachings, but failed to realise any stage.

It is said that during the current era, when the Buddha has long since passed away, and when knowledge of the correct method of practice is hard to find, that only two kinds of individuals remain: those who are trainable (*ñeyya*) and those who are unable to realise the Dhamma in this existence (*padaparama*). During the lifetime of the Buddha there were two other types: those who can quickly realise the Dhamma from a brief discourse (*ugghatitaññū*), and those who can gain realisation after a more detailed explanation (*vipañcitaññū*). If this is true, then we cannot gain realisation without considerable effort — merely listening to the Dhamma or reading books is not enough.

How Long Does it Take?

At the end of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta the Buddha promises that one who practises in this way for seven years can expect to gain the stage of a Non-returner or an Arahant. Let alone seven years, one can achieve that in seven months ... seven days ... one day or even half a day. The Buddha acknowledges the difference between individuals. Some will inevitably take longer than others — depending on the maturity of their perfections and how hard they strive in the current existence. Nowadays (it is thought), living beings have less well developed perfections, and most do not strive at all.

Suppose there is a destination called “El Dorado” to be reached and that different individuals, currently living at different distances from it, all set out with different degrees of faith and enthusiasm.

1. Some are 10,000 miles away. If they set off at a steady 10 miles a day, they will reach it in 1,000 days.
2. Others are 10,000 miles away, and set off at 10 miles a day, but mostly only walk 1 mile. They will reach it in about 24 years if they live that long.
3. Others are only 1,000 miles away, and set off at 10 miles a day for ten days, but then stop, and don't walk any further. They will never reach the goal even if they live to be 100 years old.

4. Others are only 1,000 miles away, and set off at a run, covering 100 miles a day on average. They will reach it in just 10 days.

One can see that there would be any number of different permutations and combinations of different individuals at different distances from El Dorado, applying different degrees of effort, and taking widely divergent times to reach the goal. Many would fail to reach their destination before they die.

It is the same nowadays regarding the goal of attaining nibbāna. We do not know how far we are from the goal, nor how long it will take us to reach it. All we can know for sure is that if we do not make a strenuous and continuous effort to reach nibbāna, we have no hope of reaching it.

Please put aside the question of how long it will take. What we do know for sure is that if we make a strenuous and continuous effort to reach the goal, even if we do not attain it in this very life, definitely we will be getting closer day-by-day. Getting closer to nibbāna means reducing the amount of craving and other mental defilements, and reducing defilements means reducing suffering. The results are immediate (*akāliko*), inviting investigation (*ehipassiko*), visible by oneself (*sandiṭṭhiko*), leading onwards (*opaneyyiko*), and realisable by the wise for oneself (*paccattaṃ veditabbo viññūhi*).

Knowing Realities in the Present

The Buddha's most important discourse on meditation, the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, teaches that one should develop and firmly establish the four foundations of mindfulness. That is, mindfulness of the body (*kāya*), feelings (*vedanā*), consciousness (*citta*), and mental phenomena (*dhamma*). The Buddha says:—

“Idha, bhikkhave, bhikkhu kāye kāyānupassī viharati ātāpi sampajāno satimā, vineyya loke abhijjhādomanassaṃ”

“Here, monks, a monk dwells contemplating the body in the body, ardent, clearly comprehending and mindful, having abandoned covetousness and sorrow regarding the world.”

The latter part of this phrase is repeated for feelings, consciousness, and mental states. It is vital to understand these key elements to the practice of mindfulness meditation.

1. Ardent (*ātāpī*), means with stirred up energy that has the power to burn up the mental defilements. It is not a half-hearted effort, nor even a moderate amount of effort. It means a vigorous, fervent, and do-or-die effort like that made by Bāhiya.
2. Clearly comprehending (*sampajāno*) means with unconfused mindfulness, focused on the purpose of practising meditation, which is to understand phenomena as they really are.
3. Mindful (*satimā*) means paying attention to the present realities, not allowing the mind to wander to the past or future.
4. Abandoning (*vineyya*) covetousness (*abhijjhā*) and sorrow (*đomanassa*) concerning the world (*loke*), means that one does not long for worldly benefits such as praise, fame, or material offerings. Neither does one hanker for and recollect sensual pleasures that one has left behind in order to practise meditation seriously. The meditator keeps in mind the goal of attaining nibbāna, which is the cessation of craving.

It is only if the four foundations of mindfulness are developed in this way that the Buddha's promise given at the end of the discourse will apply. If one meditates half-heartedly, with confused mindfulness, while still longing for sensual pleasures, one will not attain even the goal of Stream-winning within seventy years, let alone attaining the stage of Non-returning in seven years.

To develop mindfulness, one should begin by cultivating mindfulness of the body. The first method is the practice of mindfulness of respiration (*ānāpānasati*), but there are several other methods described in the section on mindfulness of the body. One may choose another method that suits one's temperament such as analysis of the body into the four elements, contemplation of the 32 body parts, or contemplation of corpses in various stages of decay. Additionally, one should be mindful of all daily activities and the four bodily postures. Thus, one should be mindful and clearly comprehending when going or coming, stretching and bending the limbs, looking here or there, chewing or tasting, urinating or defecating, standing, sitting, walking, or lying down, and so forth. In brief, "One should be mindful of each and every activity of the body and mind throughout the entire day, without missing anything."

To fulfil these instructions regarding mindfulness of the body is hard enough, but then one must also be mindful of feelings,

thoughts, and mental states too. It is not easy to maintain mindfulness throughout the entire day without any lapses. Nevertheless, one should not despair. Whatever can be achieved in this life, can be achieved by effort if it is accompanied by knowledge.

If effort alone were enough, no one would need to study or listen to teachings. The Buddha would not have needed to spend forty-five years repeating the teachings in many different forms, reiterating and clarifying subtle and elusive points to remove misunderstandings.

Everyone I have ever taught finds it difficult to control the mind well. Some can sit still for an hour or more, while others cannot sit still even for fifteen minutes. No one can control the mind without repeated effort and continuous encouragement and instruction.

Freedom from the five hindrances is essential. While thinking sensual or angry thoughts, while plagued by sloth or restlessness, or confused about the right method, one won't be able to gain concentration, let alone insight or nibbāna. Access or neighbourhood concentration (*upacāra samādhi*) is free from the five hindrances. One who practises tranquillity meditation (*samatha*) gains absorption (*appanā samādhi*), while one who practises insight meditation (*vipassanā*) gains continuous and unbroken awareness of realities in the present. Although there are no hindrances, full absorption is not attained because that is not the aim — the aim is to gain insight and realise nibbāna by the shortest possible route. Just as full absorption is not obtained when contemplating the profound virtues of the Blessed One, it is also not obtained when contemplating the profound nature of the truth of suffering. Likewise, only access concentration is gained while meditating on the recollection of death, as practised by [the weaver's daughter](#) for three years. She did not gain any psychic powers, she could not recollect her previous lives, but she did realise nibbāna and gain Stream-winning on listening to the Buddha's teaching as recorded in the Dhammapada, [verse 174](#):—

“Blind is this world, few are there who see clearly.

Like birds that escape from the fowler's net, few go to a blissful state.”

Many other lay people gained Stream-winning when their minds had been made spotless, malleable, and pure by listening to the Dhamma. A vast number of lay people with King Bimbisāra attained

Stream-winning while listening to the Buddha's teaching. None of them practised to attain absorption. They were just ordinary lay people addicted to the enjoyment of sensual pleasures, but they gained the spotless eye of the Dhamma just where they sat.

Meditation may be easy or difficult. It depends on the perfections of the meditator. The Buddha explained four modes of progress: slow and painful, slow but not painful, fast but painful, fast and not painful. Bāhiya seems to have been of the last category. Difficult or easy depends on attachment or lack of attachment. Fast or slow depends on intelligence or the lack of it. One with keen intelligence, but strong attachment may not take a long time to attain enlightenment, but will find it difficult. One with weak intelligence, but also weak attachment will not find meditation difficult, and will take a long time to gain mature insight.

For any individual, the shortest possible route to nibbāna will be one that does not deviate. The devout Buddhist will spend every waking hour cultivating the seven factors of enlightenment. While fulfilling social duties to support his or her family, or for a monk while studying and teaching the Dhamma, the aim will always be to reduce defilements, and not to accumulate possessions, fame, praise, and so forth. The right path is, of course, the Noble Eightfold Path consisting of morality, concentration, and wisdom. Whether one is one gone-forth or a householder it is not enough to perform meritorious deeds such as charity, morality, reverence, teaching the Dhamma, *etc.* One must also develop concentration and insight, which means that one must practise meditation. It won't be sufficient merely to listen to Dhamma talks and read books on meditation if one fails to practise the instruction contained therein. The following is an extract from the Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw's [Discourse on the Sallekha Sutta](#).

Right Concentration

"Absorption (*jhāna*) is the concentration of attention on one single object such as earth, water, in-and-out-breathing, an organ of the body or a corpse. This state of consciousness involving concentration and tranquillity is *samatha jhāna*. The other kind of absorption is *vipassanā jhāna*, which has as its object the contemplation and insight-knowledge of the three characteristics: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self.

Attributes of the First Absorption

In the first absorption the meditator is free from sensual desires that always dominate ordinary people who have not yet developed concentration. The first absorption also ensures freedom from the other four hindrances: ill-will, torpor and laziness, restlessness and worry, and doubt. This freedom is enjoyed not only while the meditator is in absorption, but also just before and just after the attainment of this state of consciousness. Freedom from hindrances is followed by joy (*pīti*) and bliss (*sukha*). The meditator enjoys feelings of ecstasy pervading the whole body, and is completely free from stiffness, tiredness, and other physical discomfort.

Besides being freed from hindrances, the meditator has five attributes accompanying the first absorption — ecstatic joy, intense bliss, very active initial application (*vitakka*), sustained application (*vicāra*) and one-pointedness (*ekaggatā*) or concentration (*samādhi*). The body of the meditator who has attained the first absorption is motionless, firm, and composed. This state of consciousness may last two or three hours; or it may last the whole day and night.

Because of the freedom from hindrances and the five varieties of experience that characterise the first absorption, the meditator tends to be elated and conceited. However, in his reply to Cunda in the Sallekha Sutta, the Buddha says unequivocally that the attainment of the first absorption does not mean the lessening of defilements.

There are grounds for delusion on the part of the meditator who has attained the first absorption. He or she expects some unusual experience and so in the absence of any such experience, tends to be deluded into a false sense of attainment. Some have delusions because they are misguided by incompetent teachers. In the case of some meditators, relative freedom from hindrances, joy, and other experiences are satisfying enough to give cause for complacency.

However, this absorption experience should not be confused with the practice of effacement that helps to lessen defilements. The first absorption can only ward off the defilements, whereas, through the practice of effacement the meditator can eventually remove them, root and branch. Yet, the attainment of this absorption tends to give the meditator the impression of being a Stream-winner or an Arahant. There were bhikkhus subject to such illusions in the time of the Buddha and after his *parinibbāna*.

The above shows that concentration alone is not enough to progress on the path to nibbāna. After all, the Bodhisatta's teachers were both adepts in the practice of absorption, but neither of them knew anything about the Noble Eightfold Path later discovered and revealed by the Buddha.

On the eve of his Enlightenment, the Bodhisatta, having fully developed the absorptions, applied his mind to the knowledge of his own previous existences and to those of other beings. However far back he recalled, no original cause of suffering could be found.

The Method of Insight Meditation

He then changed his meditation method, and started examining the five aggregates and their causal relationships. It was this knowledge of dependent origination and conditional relations (*paṭṭhāna*) that led to Enlightenment, and not mere concentration.

The meditators of the modern era, too, can develop insight by using the same method of insight meditation, by contemplating the five aggregates and understanding their causal relationships. To succeed, they will also need to develop concentration that is free from the five hindrances and accompanied by the five factors of initial application, sustained application, joy, bliss, and one-pointedness.

When one begins the practice of mindfulness meditation¹ (*satipaṭṭhāna*) the mind will wander here and there. It will not stay even for a minute on the primary objects of meditation, which are the rising and falling movements of the abdomen while sitting, the movements of the feet while walking, or the movements of the limbs and intention to move them while doing other daily activities such as eating, washing, or bathing. However, after diligent and persistent practice for many hours, many days, or several weeks, there will come a time when the meditator's mind ceases to wander for long periods, but remains focused on the phenomena arising in the present moment, then immediately passing away again. There are no longer any thoughts of sensuality or ill-will. The meditator is not sleepy, but energetic with a bright and enthusiastic mind. Now exhilarated by some signs of progress, the meditator feels joy and

¹I prefer to call it mindfulness meditation (*satipaṭṭhāna*) because insight does not arise initially. We could call it insight meditation (*vipassanā*) just because its purpose is to gain insight, but before insight has arisen it is preferable to refer to the practice as the establishment of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*).

bliss, and as the mind remains steady on the present phenomena, one-pointedness is also present. This is called *vipassanā jhāna*. This purity of mind (*citta visuddhi*) has the ability to penetrate the objects noted and understand their three characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self. Seeing things as they truly are is purity of view (*diṭṭhi visuddhi*) with which the meditator gains analytical knowledge of mind and matter (*nāmarūpapariccheda-ñāṇa*), knowledge by discerning conditionality (*paccayapariggaha-ñāṇa*), and knowledge by comprehension (*sammasana-ñāṇa*).

If the meditator continues applying the mind to the present realities, and sustains the application of the mind to them, it will become obvious that they arise and immediately pass away, which is the knowledge of arising and passing away: (*udayabbaya-ñāṇa*). At this stage, joy, bliss, and one-pointedness become the predominant factors. This is the second *vipassanā jhāna*. This is a very enjoyable stage of meditation, but due to the very pleasant experiences that occur, it is also possible that the corruptions of insight can arise. Without the right guidance, meditators may over-estimate their achievements and relax their efforts.

However, if they follow the advice given by a skilled meditation instructor, they may achieve higher stages such as knowledge of dissolution (*bhaṅga ñāṇa*), awareness of fearfulness (*bhayatupaṭṭhāna-ñāṇa*), knowledge of misery (*ādīnava-ñāṇa*), knowledge of disgust (*nibbidā-ñāṇa*), knowledge of desire for deliverance (*muñcītukamyatā-ñāṇa*), and knowledge of re-observation (*paṭisaṅkhānupassana-ñāṇa*). These higher stages are not pleasant at all, so one who is not very strongly motivated may retreat in the face of such difficulties. If meditation really were easy, we would all be enlightened by now. The truth is that it is sometimes easy and pleasant, but at other stages it is difficult and unpleasant. One should not under-estimate the task, nor should one over-estimate it, and therefore shrink back from striving to achieve higher stages. Even if something is currently impossible it will later become possible if a continuous effort is made. These advanced stages of insight are the third *vipassanā jhāna*.

Going beyond them, the ardent meditator will achieve the knowledge of equanimity about formations (*saṅkhārupekkhā-ñāṇa*), which is the fourth *vipassanā jhāna* with its two attributes of equanimity and one-pointedness.

No Shortcuts, but Plenty of Diversions

The shortest possible route to nibbāna is too direct and too steep for most. Those like Bāhiya can climb straight up the side of the mountain, but others must take a long and winding path. Many more will stop climbing and stop to admire the view while taking a rest. Some will take a wrong turn up a blind alley and have to retrace their steps, and a few will meet with disaster along the way, destroying any hope of attaining the goal in this existence.

A recent discussion thread on a Buddhist forum asked, “If there is no beginning to *saṃsāra*, why are we not all Enlightened yet?” Perhaps the answer is, “Because there is no end to diversions.” Albert Einstein (allegedly) said, “Only two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity, and I am not sure about the former.”

So, don't be stupid. Take a realistic view of the task to be achieved, and don't concern yourself with how long it will take. It is not something that you can know or that anyone else can tell you. The only sure thing is that the path to higher ground is uphill, and to get there requires faith, effort, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. Stop doing unwholesome things, keep on cultivating wholesome things, and, above all, purify your mind through constant mindfulness of the body, feelings, thoughts, and mental states.